



## Business

# Making URI a biotech leader

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Dr. Jeffrey R. Seemann, dean of URI's College of the Environment and Life Sciences, examines a model of the new \$60-million life sciences building that will train the next generation of biotech workers. Seemann calls the building an icon for the state's new economy. An artist's rendering is at left.

The Providence Journal / Bill Murphy

Amgen Inc. plans to announce today a \$1-million donation to the University of Rhode Island to help finance the construction of a \$60-million biotechnology and life sciences center at the Kingston campus, the drug manufacturer's largest charitable gift in the state since it opened its plant here in 2002.

The company said its gift signals its continued support for a campaign by URI to match its academic offerings to state economic development goals, particularly the expansion of the biotechnology sector.

In about five years, Amgen has created 1,700 jobs at its West Greenwich facility, mainly the type of high-paying positions prized by state economic development officials. For its part, URI has taken steps to guarantee a steady supply of labor to the company, and to help the state recruit similar firms.

"This underscores how serious we are about science education," Amgen spokesman Larry Bernard said yesterday. "It's essential if Rhode Island is going to become a leader in biotechnology manufacturing."

In 2003, Amgen helped URI establish a biomanufacturing program in Providence, donating \$25,000 and guiding the development of the curriculum for a specialized bachelor of science degree.

There are just 24 students per class in the four-year program, but already at least 10 participants have obtained internships or jobs at Amgen. (Students have also found summer work at HybriGene, Neurotech and other firms.)

Amgen has also donated drug manufacturing equipment to URI, and provided nearly \$100,000 to a professor to teach an introductory biotechnology class offered to the public and broadcast on local TV.

"They were so in need of trained employees, our program was really established with their guidance to quickly train workers in this industry," said Todd Mcleish, a URI spokesman.

State officials have also helped the university to better train students to staff biotechnology companies.

The biomanufacturing lab, for example, was constructed with \$400,000 in special appropriations from the governor, legislature and the former Human Resource Investment Council.

The planned new center, however, is by far the most ambitious effort by URI to grow the biotechnology industry in Rhode Island.

To pay for the building, URI will use a \$50-million bond, approved by voters in 2004, and raise another \$10 million in private donations. Including Amgen's gift, the school needs \$8 million more to build the four-story, 140,000-square-foot facility.

University officials have trumpeted the academic value of the new facility. Plans for the building — designed by Boston-based Payette Associates — include high-tech classrooms and laboratories for DNA sequencing, genomics, the growing of marine organisms and research into Lyme disease and West Nile virus. There will be office and laboratory space for 35 faculty members.

But at an 11 a.m. ground-breaking ceremony scheduled today in South Kingstown, university and state officials will focus as much on the impact to the state's work force as to its intelligentsia.

"This building is the icon for the new economy for Rhode Island," said Jeffrey R. Seemann, dean of the URI College of Environment and Life Sciences, who says the center will represent the "Slater Mill for the 21st century."

"It represents the essential partnership that needs to exist between university, governments and companies," he said yesterday. "We are trying to create the high-tech, knowledge-based economy."

As the state's manufacturing sector has withered, economic development officials have struggled to compete with Massachusetts for biotechnology companies lured to the Route 128 corridor by potential collaborations with high-tech schools MIT and Harvard.

The new URI center could help shift that balance, said Seemann, a chairman of the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council.

The added resources will help expand the biomanufacturing program, he said. Eventually, the center will be joined by a pharmacy school, chemistry building and new school of nursing, all connected via tunnels and above-ground walkways to form a “research park” for training scientists and incubating companies.

The biotechnology and life sciences center — a steel structure with a red brick veneer, sloped metal roof and a staircase shaped like a double-helix — is expected to open in early 2009. It will be the largest academic building at the university, according to Robert A. Weygand, the school’s vice president for administration.

The shift at URI toward increased pre-professional training is not only the result of lobbying by Amgen and state officials, according to Melissa Withers, who oversees the science and technology advisory council for the state Economic Development Corporation.

Undergraduate students, she said, are increasingly focused on preparing for high-wage jobs, including in biotechnology. In response to this demand, the Community College of Rhode Island has started a biotechnology certificate program, she said.

“Students today are more and more mindful of having skills that are applicable in the work force,” Withers said yesterday. “They want to get jobs; they’re not looking for a purely academic pursuit.”

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